

RESEARCH ARTICLE / ÉTUDE ORIGINALE

Mining the Land While Sustaining *Iiyiyiuituwīn*: Exercising Indigenous Sovereignty through Collaboration in Eeyou Istchee

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Abstract

In Canada, the relationship between Indigenous Nations and mining corporations is characterized by asymmetrical power dynamics. To address this situation, several Indigenous Nations who see mining as an opportunity to realize their financial autonomy have developed mechanisms to enhance their capacity to regulate how their traditional territories are exploited. Drawing on collaborative research conducted with the Cree of Eeyou Istchee, we show how these initiatives can allow Indigenous peoples to reconcile mining with ways of life seemingly at odds with extractive development. From local perspectives, the Eeyouch have managed to persuade the developers of the mine operating on their territory to meaningfully engage with *Iiyiyiuituwīn*—the “Eeyou way of life,” fundamentally anchored in respect for and reciprocity with the land. While numerous Indigenous Nations exercise their sovereignty by opposing extractive development, others realize it through building relationship with corporations in ways that sustain their enduring political philosophy.

Résumé

Au Canada, la relation entre les nations autochtones et les sociétés minières est caractérisée par une dynamique de pouvoir asymétrique. Pour remédier à cette situation, plusieurs nations autochtones, qui voient dans l'exploitation minière une occasion de réaliser leur autonomie financière, ont élaboré des mécanismes visant à renforcer leur capacité à réglementer l'exploitation de leurs territoires traditionnels. En nous appuyant sur une recherche menée en collaboration avec les Cris d'Eeyou Istchee, nous montrons comment ces types d'initiatives peuvent permettre aux peuples autochtones de concilier l'exploitation minière avec des modes de vie apparemment en désaccord avec le développement extractif. Du point de vue local, les Eeyouch ont réussi à persuader les promoteurs de la mine exploitée sur leur territoire de s'engager de manière significative dans le *Iiyiyiuituwīn* - le « mode de vie des Eeyou », fondamentalement ancré dans le respect et la réciprocité avec la terre. Si de nombreuses nations indigènes exercent leur souveraineté en s'opposant au développement extractif, d'autres la réalisent en établissant des relations avec les entreprises de manière à soutenir leur philosophie politique durable.

Keywords: extractive development; Indigenous peoples; sovereignty; Impacts and Benefits Agreements; Canada

Mots clés : Développement extractif; Peuples autochtones; souveraineté; Ententes sur les répercussions et les avantages; Canada

Introduction

Drawing on collaborative ethnographic research conducted in partnership with the Cree Nation of Wemindji (Eyou Istchee, Quebec), this article examines how Indigenous Nations can exercise their right to self-determination by “honourably partnering,” in the community’s words, with a mine proponent. Most of the literature on Indigenous peoples’ ways of articulating their sovereignty in relation to the extractive industry in Canada, and beyond, highlight oppositional politics as its most prevalent expression (Pasternak, 2017). Indigenous Nations oppose mining given its tendency to cause detrimental impacts on their livelihoods (Bebbington et al., 2008) and to embody deep-seated ontological differences (Blaser, 2018) and free mining regimes that prioritize corporate interests over their own (Laforce et al., 2009). The scholarship documenting the few cases of Indigenous Nations’ positive engagements with mine proponents has emphasized how the Indigenous Nations were able to exercise their United Nations–sanctioned (UNDRIP, 2008) right to free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) before mines were built on their territories (Ballard and Banks, 2003). Drawing on case studies, including Wemindji, Papillon and Rodon (2019: 316) underline “the transformative potential of Indigenous-driven approaches” to implementing FPIC. Such approaches, they explain, may include a “community-driven impact assessment” or “protocols and agreements with project proponents, under which the latter recognise Indigenous ways of expressing consent as a precondition for a project to proceed” (Papillon and Rodon, 2019: 316). Respecting Indigenous peoples’ right to FPIC while recognizing Indigenous ways of exercising that right, as numerous studies confirm (see, for example, Weitzner, 2019), is key to the realization of Indigenous self-determination in mining contexts. But how is that right enacted on a day-to-day basis once a mine has been built in an Indigenous territory?

As part of a broader intellectual movement to decolonize ways of thinking and enacting Indigenous self-determination, a growing number of Indigenous scholars have opened up the concept of sovereignty in order to theorize it from Indigenous perspectives (see, for example, Simpson, 2014). In doing so, they have invited us, scholars of Indigenous emancipation movements and practices, to move beyond the legal, judicial meaning of sovereignty and self-determination in international law to grasp its everyday conceptualizations, experiences and practices in our analyses. This article builds on this body of literature, and more specifically on the Indigenous resurgence scholarship (see Elliott, 2018, for a general review) and its focus on Indigenous peoples’ everyday acts of “refusing” colonial logics (Simpson, 2014), through alternate forms of engagement with humans and more-than-humans (Todd, 2018). By examining how the Cree Nation of Wemindji has exercised its sovereignty through engaging with the developers of the mine operating on their territory as “partners,” we show how the realization of Indigenous self-determination in mining contexts involves more than FPIC. It

is also grounded, to quote Métis/otipemisiw anthropologist Zoe Todd (2018: 62), in everyday gestures that seek to “build and sustain relationships which disrupt the State’s [and corporations’] attempts to ‘command and control’ the terms upon which Indigenous peoples, and Canada more broadly, interacts with the lands, waters and atmospheres within its reach.”

After presenting our research methods, we outline the constraining politico-legal framework within which Indigenous people enact their sovereignty in Canadian mining contexts. Drawing on the historical and anthropological literature on the Cree of Eeyou Istchee, we then describe how this Indigenous nation has historically articulated its sovereignty while engaging with fur traders, the settler states of Quebec and Canada, and extractive development corporations. As we will see, the Cree¹ have understood and lived these engagements as occasions of partnering with non-Cree, and in so doing, of sustaining *Iiyiyiuituwin*—the Eeyou way of life, which is fundamentally anchored in respect for and reciprocity with the land, an approach Wemindji has followed in its dealings with Goldcorp Inc./Newmont Mining Corporation.² It would also have been interesting to examine to what extent, and with what impact, these two mining companies have welcomed the framing of mining activities in Wemindji as a “partnership.” However, the scholarship on corporate engagements with Indigenous peoples is replete with analyses of corporate discourses and practices, to the detriment of Indigenous voices. To avoid further reinforcing the modern/colonial myth of our universality—the deeply ingrained presupposition that there is “only one world in the world *at any one time*” (Povinelli, 2011; emphasis in the original)—we instead centre our analysis on Indigenous perspectives and ask, How has the Cree Nation of Wemindji come to conceptualize and experience its relationship with the mining company as a collaborative one? In response to Indigenous resurgence scholars’ call to document what has historically refused and continues to refuse to be eliminated by settler colonialism, we centre our examination on the “survivance”³ (Vizenor, 2008) of *Iiyiyiuituwin* alongside mining in Eeyou Istchee. As we will see, negotiating and implementing a collaborative agreement with a mining company constituted, from the Wemindji Eeyouch perspective, an assertion of its jurisdiction.

Research Methods

This article draws on collaborative ethnographic fieldwork that was conducted by Vanthuyne with the Cree Nation of Wemindji between 2015 and 2019, when Goldcorp/Newmont’s Éléonore mine was operating on its territory, with the research assistance of Gauthier (2015–2017). It will be specified in the article if the citation has been translated from Cree or French into English. See the online appendix for further details about the methodology and ethics protocols we followed.

A Constraining Politico-Legal Framework

In Canada, as in most of the rest of the world, the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the mining industry has generally been characterized by asymmetrical power dynamics. Notwithstanding the growing recognition of Indigenous peoples’

right to self-determination at international and national levels, Indigenous perspectives and positions toward mining tend to remain sidelined. In Canada, this situation results from the free mining principle that underlies most provincial and territorial mining regimes (Laforce et al., 2009), as well as the “capitalist pressure to extract” that “forms the basis for a hegemonic complex able to counter and resist” (Pineault, 2018: 131) oppositional forces to extractive forms of development. The free mining principle comprises three interlinked rights: the rights of entry onto lands containing minerals, of acquiring a claim on those lands, and of obtaining a lease to produce minerals. While Indigenous peoples affected by mines may have signed land claim agreements that recognize some measure of property rights and sovereignty over their territory—as is the case for the Cree of Eeyou Istchee—these agreements do not protect them from unwanted mining projects.⁴ Thus, Canada’s colonial heritage has left two indelible marks on its mining regimes: the divisibility of surface rights from subsurface ones and the granting of ownership over underground resources to the state (Lamontagne, 2005). The state, through its “selective absence” (Laforce et al., 2009) and out of a desire to stimulate economic growth (Paquette, 2000), has usually tended to favour the interests of mining entrepreneurs. The emergence of increasing concerns about the detrimental environmental impacts of the extractive industry among the general public in the 1980s (Simard and Lepage, 2004), as well as the official recognition of Aboriginal title and rights in Canada’s Constitution Act, 1982, have triggered and shaped mining governance reforms (Thériault, 2010). However, in the Province of Quebec, the jurisdiction that officially regulates mining in Eeyou Istchee, the most recent Mining Act (2013) did not restructure “decision-making processes in the mining sector in a way that would allow for the implementation of the Crown’s constitutional duty” (Thériault, 2016: 149).

Faced with the legal uncertainty that the duty to consult instills in the regulatory approval process of mining projects, mining companies have, since the late 1980s, “become proactive at engaging directly with Indigenous peoples in order to mobilize their support for development projects that could potentially impact their rights” (Papillon and Rodon, 2017: 219). In Canada, this type of corporate engagement has mainly been realized through the negotiation of private, and oftentimes confidential Impacts and Benefits Agreements (IBAs) between corporations and Indigenous representative organizations—such as the Opinagow Collaboration Agreement (2011), the IBA that the Cree Nation of Wemindji signed with Goldcorp in 2011. Typically, IBAs include provisions for financial compensation or revenue sharing (royalties), employment quotas, skills training and other educational benefits, contracting and joint venture opportunities, as well as environmental mitigation-related measures. Sometimes, as in the Opinagow agreement, they also comprise cultural-related benefits and community involvement in monitoring and managing the agreement’s implementation and project’s impacts. Through IBAs, industry proponents secure the consent of the affected Indigenous Nations, or at the very least their leadership, in this way reducing legal uncertainties and socio-political resistance to their projects. For Indigenous Nations, these negotiated agreements not only limit the negative impacts of mining but also secure some socio-economic benefits. Moreover, IBAs acknowledge their territorial and self-government rights—a non-negligible improvement to the state-backed colonization

and resulting Indigenous dispossession that have characterized mining development in Canada up to the early 1990s (Peterson St-Laurent and Le Billon, 2015).

A power asymmetry nonetheless remains, numerous scholars warn (see, for example, Laforce et al., 2009), between multimillion-dollar corporations and historically impoverished and socio-politically marginalized Indigenous Nations. Oftentimes, given their more limited capacity, resources and mine-related knowledge compared to their corporate counterparts, Indigenous actors enter IBA discussions with inferior negotiating power (see, for example, Dylan et al., 2013). Further, Papillon and Rodon claim (2017: 217), the negotiations of these agreements only offer a “truncated version of FPIC from the perspective of the communities involved,” since they are usually bargained between corporations’ representatives and Indigenous leaders, with limited community input and deliberations—creating what O’Faircheallaigh (2010) calls a “negotiation bubble.” In addition, O’Faircheallaigh continues, signing this type of private contract usually prevents Indigenous peoples from using two of their historically most powerful weapons when faced with undesirable extractive projects on their territories or their unforeseen impacts: delaying or halting them, either through direct action or by accessing the legal and regulatory systems, and “the ability to embarrass governments politically by using the media to appeal to its constituents.” (O’Faircheallaigh, 2010: 76). There are typically clauses in IBAs that contractually preclude or inhibit the employment of both tools.

As an effective means to gain a “social license to operate” (Prno and Slocombe, 2012), IBAs are principally used by industry, their critics caution, to gain access to land for resource extraction, not to fulfill the wider aspirations of their Indigenous “partners.” Their negotiations do not challenge “a company-centric approach to development. . . to one of understanding the other; instead [they rest] squarely within the paradigm of the corporate self” (Owen and Kemp, 2013: 32). Hence Cameron and Levitan’s (2014: 48) “healthy suspicion”—following Kuokkanen’s (2011) critique of “market-based self-governance” and despite research findings that IBAs are sometimes perceived by Indigenous Nations as “assert[ions] of [their] jurisdiction” (Cameron and Levitan, 2014: 45)—that such agreements are the best tools to realize Indigenous self-determination. According to Kuokkanen (2011: 286), “Analysis that argues the compatibility of Indigenous self-determination and free market ideologies disregards the deep-seated ontological differences between neoliberal ideologies and Indigenous philosophies based on a close interaction with the land and emphasizing individual and collective responsibilities of taking care of the land.” However, in what follows, we demonstrate how negotiating and implementing an IBA with a mining company constituted, from the Wemindji Eeyouch’s perspective, and despite “deep-seated ontological differences” between them and the mine proponent, an assertion of their jurisdiction.

Partnering as Enacting an Enduring Ontological Disagreement

Since the “ontological turn” in social science (Escobar, 2007), the claim of “deep-seated ontological differences” between Indigenous peoples and settler societies has increasingly been mobilized for elucidating mining conflicts. According to this literature, mining conflicts between Indigenous actors and corporate ones are not simply contestations over impacts, benefits or jurisdictions. They rather stage, to

quote de la Cadena (2015: 284), an “ontological disagreement” that “cannot be ‘overcome’ because the principle that partitions the sensible into nature and humanity (and divides what counts as real from what does not) is not common to all parts.” The Andean peasants that de la Cadena worked with in Peru opposed corporate mining ventures not only because of land encroachment, potential mine-related contamination or harm to local tourism (a key source of their monetary income); from their world, she argues, these ventures would “also destroy a socionatural world,” because the mountains that large-scale, open-pit mining projects raze to extract the ore beneath them are not lifeless matter but sentient beings to whom Andean peasants have social obligations (de la Cadena, 2010: 355).

Following this logic, and as suggested by Kuokkanen (2011) in the quote cited above, extractive development and Indigenous ontologies seem fundamentally incompatible. Yet de la Cadena notes that, with respect to the Andean peasants she conducted her research with, mining has been part of their lives as an economic activity ever since the Conquest. It is not mining, *per se*, but specifically large-scale mining, that these peasants opposed. While earlier mining technologies “allo[w] for the continuation of relations with earth beings,” the ones used nowadays by corporations “destro[y] earth beings themselves” (de la Cadena, 2010: 355). Hence the simultaneous promotion of artisanal mining and opposition to corporate mining in the Andes (Hirsch, 2017).

Conversations with Cree leaders about their peoples’ engagements with mining also suggest a conditional opening toward this type of economic activity. As Rodney Mark, who was chief of Wemindji when the Opinagow agreement was signed and deputy grand chief of the Cree Nation Government when Vanthuyne interviewed him in 2016, the Cree are “not encouraging, but not discouraging” mining on their territory, as long as relationships dear to them may continue to thrive:

I’m not saying [that] we are encouraging mining, but I’m not saying [that] we are discouraging it either. . . . [First we look at] how much is this [project] going to impact the traditional way of life and the water, . . . the animals. And from there, we usually go from saying “okay, if there is some reassurance, and some involvement of the Cree parties,” we start thinking about economic development and business opportunities (interview with Rodney Mark, Montreal, May 19, 2016).

Numerous analyses of the Cree’s relationships with the Hudson’s Bay Company, settler federal and provincial states, and extractive development corporations highlight this First Nation’s enduring, yet continuously redefined political philosophy and governing structure (see, for example, Chaplier, 2018; Feit, 2009). Their increasing integration in Canada’s and Quebec’s politics and market-based economies did not lead to their extinction. “Rather,” Feit explains (2009: 110), the Cree have “extended their forms of relating to the land as a living society, relating to theirs in egalitarian ways, and treating individuals [and all other life forms] as socially connected” to fur traders, government agents and corporate actors. This has created a situation of co-governance, Feit claims, whereby settler governance did not simply subsume or use Cree forms of governance to its own ends. The Cree have, rather, continued to exercise “not only an effective capacity

but also an enduring ability to reproduce social lives not founded on the presuppositions of modernity” (Feit, 2009: 103). Given the “zero point” of observation produced by coloniality from which “colonizers cannot but see their own world constantly reinforced as the only one” (Blaser, 2018: 62), the “survivalance” (Vizenor, 2008) of Cree forms of relating to the land, one another and outsiders has generally remained invisible from settlers’ perspectives. Cree participation in the fur trade, the administration of beaver preserves, or industrial logging on their territory has usually been perceived by settlers as proof of their modernization or assimilation. Yet, for the Cree, these arrangements have never been experienced as “rest[ing] squarely within the paradigm of the corporate [or settler governments] self,” to quote Owen and Kemp (2013: 32) cited above. The Cree have, rather, understood their participation in non-Cree projects as occasions of partnering with them—that is, respecting settler governments’ administrations or contributing to traders’ or industrial loggers’ financial well-being while exercising and sustaining older and continuing Cree forms of land tenure and governance.

The 5,271 square kilometres of the Cree of Eeyou Istchee’s territory are divided into approximately three hundred *nituuaschiih* (hunting territories). These *nituuaschiih* constitute the basic units of the Eeyouch historical, yet flexible, system of land tenure and governance. According to Eeyou’s jurisdiction (Cree Trappers Association, 2009), each hunting territory is managed by a *nituuhuuchimaau* (hunting boss or tallyman), whose responsibilities and duties include monitoring the access to and harvesting of the land, so that it is fair and sustainable with respect to current and future members and visitors of the Crees of Eeyou Istchee. While *nituuhuuchimaau*’s roles have been redefined as a result of Eeyou Istchee’s increasing integration in the extractive economy (Chaplier, 2018), they have continued to include caring for the land by actively seeking partnerships with corporate actors, as we will show below.

Caring for the Land through Partnering with Corporate Actors

Mining in Eeyou Istchee actively began in the 1950s, following the creation of the Chibougamau Mining Commission, the construction of a highway joining Chibougamau and Saint-Félicien, and the formation of a very welcoming investing environment by the Union Nationale provincial government (Wilson, 1952). At first, mining activities were concentrated in the southern part of Eeyou Istchee, the only section of the territory that was connected to Quebec’s road network at that point in time for the extraction of gold and copper. In the 1970s, however, following the construction of the James Bay highway that linked a massive hydroelectric complex on the La Grande River, exploration work spread throughout the territory.

“From a Cree point of view,” Feit (2009: 113) notes, the La Grande River hydroelectric project was a “direct challenge to long-standing relationships and reciprocal obligations.” Hence, the Cree turned to the courts to force the Quebec government into negotiations with them. These events led to the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA) in 1975, which, signed under the duress of the ongoing construction of the dams, created a land management regime for the Cree according to which they have property rights over 1.4 per cent of their territory

(Category 1 lands); exclusive rights to hunt, fish, and trap on 15 per cent of their territory (Category 2 lands); and preferential hunting, fishing and trapping on the remaining 83.6 per cent (Category 3 lands). As a result, most of Eeyou Istchee was opened to mining development in exchange for the creation of an income-security program and a social and environmental regime, which aimed to protect *Iiyiyiuituwini* (Peters, 1999) (see online appendix for details).

It soon became evident that the JBNQA was more favourable to the state's right to exploit natural resources in Eeyou Istchee rather than to protect *Iiyiyiuituwini* (Scott, 2005). Thanks to the legal and political activism of what eventually became the Cree Nation Government (CNG), a major treaty modification was adopted in 2002, the New Relationship Agreement (NRA) (Gouvernement du Québec, 2002). This agreement granted Eeyou the right to benefit directly from extractive development on their land through the payment of royalties or rents to the CNG (Scott, 2005). Further, it allowed for greater involvement of the Cree in the industry, through the creation, for example, of the Cree Mineral Exploration Board (CMEB) and the acknowledgment of Cree customary knowledge and authority as having a role in overseeing extractive development activities. While the NRA only addressed the management of logging in Eeyou Istchee, it nonetheless created a joint Quebec-Cree committee, the CMEB, which, a few years later, developed the Cree Nation Mining Policy with the CNG. The mining policy has three pillars: "promotion and support of mining activities," "mining and sustainable practices" and "transparency and collaboration" (Cree Nation Government, 2009: 5)—with the second pillar including the "recognition of the importance of the system of Cree family land use and occupation of the territory and their continuing management by tallymen" (6). While this policy has no legal force in Canada, Papillon and Rodon (2019: 331) remind us that it nonetheless "establishes the jurisdiction of the Cree community, thereby forcing other actors to make a difficult choice; acknowledge the Cree process or face the consequences, which include costly legal challenges that can significantly delay a project and/or political mobilizations in the form of national and international public relations campaigns against the project."

There was a significant downturn in mining activities in the 1980s due to a major economic recession worldwide and the resulting drop in demand for minerals and their market values, but mining activities resumed in Eeyou Istchee in the 1990s, with exploration rushes in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In response to this mining boom, the CMEB developed an Exploration Training Program to "encourage and support Crees seeking to become more actively involved in mineral exploration activities in Eeyou Istchee."⁵ It also established an Entrepreneur's Assistance Program to "facilitate the development of mineral exploration activities by Cree [e]nterprises."⁶ The previous *nituuhuuchimaaui* of the *nituuaschii* where the mine is now located actually discovered the gold deposit currently being extracted at Eleonore while he was working as a prospector for Wemindji Exploration, a local Cree exploration company funded by the CMEB.

The road to the Opinagog Collaboration Agreement was not straightforward, with Goldcorp attempting to fast-track the construction of the Eleonore mine before any comprehensive impact review and negotiations of an IBA had been conducted (Lapointe and Scott, 2019). In response to a request from the Cree Nation of Wemindji, the CNG threatened, in July 2006, to seek an injunction against that

segmentation of the mine project, and the mining company stepped back. Despite its adversarial beginnings, however, it remained key for the Cree community's leadership to transform their relationship with Goldcorp into a "cohesive partnership." As Mark explained (Stocek and Mark, 2010: 13–14):

With really tough decisions [to make], we sat down [with the mine proponents from the beginning of the negotiations] and discussed how we could agree. . . . The changes came from within the team, changing preconceived expectations that the nature of our partnership could be, and was, more cohesive. . . . We built into the process a sense of our values benefiting the community and the company.

When the agreement was finalized in February 2011, a resolution to ratify it was presented a few months later by the Cree community's leadership to its membership at a General Assembly, where it was agreed to and adopted. According to Papillon and Rodon (2017: 221), "the negotiations of IBAs structure relations between Indigenous peoples and project proponents in a way that favours negotiations over deliberation, . . . result[ing] in a truncated version of consent that does not truly allow for the realization of the principle of FPIC." Yet in our interviews with both the Cree Nation of Wemindji's leadership and membership, we learned about the importance, from their perspective, of going "through it as a community" (interview, Wemindji, September 16, 2016). To realize that approach, the leadership organized consultations with community members throughout the agreement negotiations, as well as following its implementation. Furthermore, the Cree community focused on collective instead of individual benefits, an option that, according to Rodon et al. (2018), should be the most conducive to intergenerational and intragenerational equity and sustainability in the long term. It also secured the integration of Cree land tenure and governance structures into the mechanisms overseeing the proper implementation of the Opinagow agreement. We will now turn to an examination of how these outcomes and processes have been experienced from Wemindji Eeyouch perspectives.

Sustaining *Iiyiyuituwini* at the Mine Site

The Eleonore underground gold mine is located on the shore of the Opinaca Reservoir in the Cree Nation of Wemindji's territory, at approximately a 190 km drive from its urbanized centre. It began construction in 2011 and initiated commercial production in 2015. Mine-site operations necessitated the construction of a road, an airstrip, a processing plant, water management and storage facilities, and office space, as well as lodging accommodation for the approximate 600 fly-in, fly-out employees. The mine is expected to close in 2037.

The location of the Eleonore mine played a key role in its acceptability: while the Wemindji Cree adamantly opposed a mining development that would have affected a pristine part of their territory, they welcomed Goldcorp's mining project, as it would be built in lands that had already been flooded by hydro dams (Lapointe and Scott, 2019). As in other Indigenous Nations in Canada (see, for example, Dylan et al., 2013), high unemployment rates in Wemindji also rendered the

construction and development of Eleonore desirable for its residents (Lapointe and Scott, 2019). Around the time that an agreement with Goldcorp was signed, the Cree community unemployment rate was approximately 20 per cent, with a rate above 40 per cent for 15–24 years old. In the Opinagow agreement, Wemindji secured measures (1) “to promote the development of economic and business opportunities for the Crees, and more particularly the Wemindji Crees, by utilising, where feasible, Cree Enterprises during the Construction and Operation Phases of the Eleonore Project” (Goldcorp Inc. et al., 2011: 45) and (2) “to establish and implement programs to promote the training, employment and retention of the Crees, and more particularly the Wemindji Crees” (Goldcorp Inc. et al., 2011: 37). While business contracts or employment targets were not set as elsewhere (Rodon and Lévesque, 2015), the agreement did charge company-community committees with overseeing the company’s commitment to prioritizing Cree employment and businesses. The implementation of the different chapters of the Opinagow agreement is supervised by four company-community committees: the Employment and Training Committee, the Business Opportunities Committee, the Environment Committee and the Collaboration Committee, with this final committee overseeing the work of the others and managing the financial aspects of the agreement. Following a boom during the mine’s construction phase between 2011 and 2014, Eleonore employed around 225 Cree workers in 2019, not including those employed indirectly through contracting and servicing jobs in transportation, supply stores, hospitality, laundry, janitorial, outfitting, and administrative services. In 2020, Wemindji had a population of 1,541 inhabitants.

As documented at other mine sites in Eeyou Istchee (El Krekshi, 2009) or the Arctic (Rodon and Lévesque, 2015), a series of socio-cultural issues have constituted ongoing challenges to Cree mine-related employment at Eleonore—which was around 18 per cent in 2016. A major challenge has been adapting to a 14-day on, 14-day off schedule at the mine site. While some have found this arrangement allows them “to go out in the bush during their two-week break and practice the traditional way” (interview with a Cree community Eeyou worker, Wemindji, July 10, 2015), others have decried being away for two weeks, claiming that it has negatively impacted their family life.

While reflecting on these issues, many Cree community leaders and community members nonetheless expressed pride in their “many successes” of both an individual career and local business development nature. One community leader, for instance, enthusiastically commented that Eleonore had been “willing to take on young people with zero experience” (interview, Wemindji, July 16, 2019). Other community members observed that the Tawich Development Corporation, the corporate arm of the Cree Nation of Wemindji, had grown exponentially since the construction of Eleonore. Thanks in good part to the business opportunities opened by the mine, the corporation now comprises seventeen enterprises. This development, as Belayneh et al. (2018) note, is not only providing employment to an increasing number of Eeyouch; it is also directly benefiting them, since Wemindji is the beneficiary of its revenues.

In addition, most members of the Cree community, including those not working at the mine site, felt that Eleonore had positively contributed to their community’s socio-economic and cultural well-being. Those earning a salary through direct or

indirect employment at the mine were increasingly participating in the community's home ownership program. As a result, overcrowding, a common issue in Canada's northern Indigenous communities, was much less acute. Besides, the money the Cree Nation of Wemindji received from the mining company was mainly allocated to support the continuance of Cree traditional activities. It is not possible to detail how exactly the Cree community is benefiting financially from the mine, apart from the direct and indirect employment of its community members and the revenues from the corporate arm of the Cree community's enterprises, since the financial chapter of the public version of Opinagow Collaboration Agreement was redacted.⁷ We nonetheless learned from Wemindji's leadership that their nation receives, in addition to royalties, a fixed annual amount of funding and that this money is used to fund, among other things, land-based treatment programs.

In the Opinagow agreement, the company also commits to sustaining *Iiyiyiituwin* by pledging to "ensure the respect, preservation and promotion of the Cree culture during the Construction and Operation Phases of the Eleonore Project" (Goldcorp Inc. et al., 2011: 59). The document specifies that this commitment seeks "to recognise and respect the traditional authority of the Tallym[e]n on the management of the harvesting on the . . . traplines" (Goldcorp Inc. et al., 2011: 59) directly affected by the mine: the *nituuhuuchimaau* where the mine is located and the *nituuhuuchimaau* that the access road to the mine crosses. Furthermore, this entailed the commitment (1) "to consult with the Tallymen" of these *nituuaschi* "regarding operations that may affect the pursuit of their respective traditional activities" (Goldcorp Inc. et al., 2011: 59), (2) to make an annual contribution to a fund available to these *nituuhuuchimaau*, in order to "facilitate the continuance by the Crees of traditional activities" (Goldcorp Inc. et al., 2011: 60) and (3) "to construct and maintain a cultural site at the Eleonore Project where traditional food can be stored and prepared for the personal use of the Crees" (Goldcorp Inc. et al., 2011: 60) (see [photo 1](#)). But how have these commitments been honoured, according to the *nituuhuuchimaau* concerned?

In the conversations and interviews we had with the *nituuhuuchimaau* of the three *nituuaschi* that have been directly impacted by the mine and some of their family members, all insisted that, at first, they had good relations with the mining company. One of them recalled that when he ran into company employees on his *nituuaschi* for the first time, these employees had been particularly friendly. As he explained in an interview with Gauthier in 2015:

The first time we saw them, they were nice people. They offered us some coffee, and they also told us: "you can ask for anything you want if you are out of something. Because we are far from the hometown," is what they told us. . . . "Don't be shy to ask for anything you need," they kept saying (interview, Wemindji, October 19, 2015).

The assistance the company initially offered to provide was welcomed by these Eeyouch because it was interpreted as an acknowledgment, by the company, of the ethics of reciprocity, sharing and co-operation their system of land tenure and governance is based on (Feit, 2004).



Photo 1: Cultural site at Eleonore. Photo by Karine Vanthuyne, November 15, 2016.

On several occasions, the *nituuhuuchimaauch* living near Eleonore year-round shared with us that their workload had increased since the mining company began visiting their lands. Animals were regularly electrocuted by the fencing constructed around the mine site and injured by the heavy trucks entering and leaving the mine at high speed. Some pine trees had lost their needles, while algae had begun to appear on the reservoir located beneath the ore mine under extraction. The *nituuhuuchimaauch* explained to us that Eeyouch's reciprocal relationships with the animals, plants, water and spirit of the homeland they call Eeyou Istchee had been profoundly disturbed by the extractive activities of the mining company, and they felt it was their responsibility to monitor and help mitigate these disturbances. "I have every reason to stay in the forest. I have to take care of the land, because of Eleonore," one *nituuhuuchimaauch* stated, for example (field notes, Wemindji, July 25, 2015). And given the responsibility of the mining company for these disturbances, this interviewee also felt Goldcorp ought to provide them with the material and human assistance they required to effectively carry out their stewardship duties.

Initially, the company did, but in 2014, a year before we started fieldwork, they changed course by informing the three *nituuhuuchimaauch* living around Eleonore that, from now on, they would only help them with food, gas and transportation in

emergency situations. When we began to meet with them in 2015, the families living near the mine expressed anger when discussing this decision. From their point of view, the new guidelines regarding the mining company's support of their stewardship duties seemed to indicate that Goldcorp was no longer willing to fully "recognise and respect the traditional authority of the Tallym[e]n," as it had promised when it signed the Opinagow agreement. "They do not listen to us after the signatures. That's what I discovered," one family member said (field notes, Wemindji, July 25, 2015).

From the company's point of view, these new limitations were legitimate: they resulted from their literal interpretation of the original agreement. When the authors visited Eleonore in 2016, a mine administrator said: "The agreement, we respect it literally" (field notes, Wemindji, November 15, 2016; our translation from French). In the preamble of the "Good Neighbour" guidelines (Goldcorp Éléonore, 2015; on file with the first author), a document that Goldcorp produced in 2014 and revised in 2015 to detail the types of requests from the families they would now be granting, the mining company states that it "understands that being a good neighbour is of paramount importance." As it explains:

Being a responsible, friendly, respectful, and helpful neighbour is a dynamic part of our company's culture and a value that our employees take to heart. As a company, we strive to maintain our status of "good neighbours" and we value the flexibility to accommodate the needs of affected traplines' Tallymen and their direct family members.

The document also notes that "requests for transportation for hunting (...) and ski-dooes (...) have become more frequent and costly" and that "the frequency of these requests can only increase in the future." Since this "will [in turn] affect the management and control of all other operations" and those types of requests "do not fall under our mandate or responsibility," the company announced that, from now on, it will only grant "reasonable requests of basic necessities (a pint of milk, a loaf of bread, etc.) . . . according to its ability to accommodate such requests."

It is important to note that some of the Cree community members with whom Vanthuyne and Gauthier spoke in 2016 shared the mining company's point of view. According to them, it was not the responsibility of the extractive industry to provide support to the families directly impacted by their activities. Rather, they believed that these families' requests arose from a culture of dependence that, fundamentally, was not Eeyou but colonial in origin—viewing Eeyouch as being self-sufficient in their very essence. Eeyouch's stories of their interactions with fur traders or settler government agents, however, show some expectation of support. Many of these accounts, Feit (2017: 39) explains, focus on how "surviving can be both aided and threatened by relationships to animals, Eeyouch, and Whitemen. . . . Speakers talk about families seeking out relationships, or cutting other relationships short, or avoiding, criticizing, or calling for renewed relationships." We believe that the critique of Goldcorp's "Good Neighbour" guidelines by the *nituuhuuchimaauch* and their family members was a call for renewed relationships with the mining company, based on a genuine

acknowledgment of *nituuhuuchimaauch* as the stewards of the land on which Eleonore is operating. A *nituuhuuchimaaau* explained to us that not being acknowledged as such was extremely painful. It made him feel like “a visitor in my own territory, and it hurts” (interview, Wemindji, November 13, 2016). He also shared that this was not a new feeling for him, but one he first felt when he was forced to attend residential school.

Reflecting on that phrase “I feel like a visitor in my own territory, and it hurts,” the authors recall a conversation they had with an Eleonore administrator when they visited the mine in 2016, a few days after their conversation with the *nituuhuuchimaaau* quoted. While the administrator boasted of the many ways in which his company was collaborating with the Cree for the management of the mine’s operations and its impacts, his assistant remarked, “[We collaborate with the Cree] because we are [operating] in Cree territory” (field notes, Cree community, November 15, 2016; our translation from French). The administrator immediately corrected his assistant, stating: “Wait a minute, we are first and foremost in Quebec,” an assertion to which his assistant replied, “Well, I would rather say that we are first in Cree territory,” to which the administrator replied, “But I mean legally speaking, we are in Quebec.”

This exchange makes it clear that from this administrator’s point of view, which reflects the dominant settler colonial perspective in Quebec and Canada, the Cree are not a sovereign nation, as they have self-asserted (see, for example, Grand Council of the Crees, 1995) but a conquered people. By signing the JBNQA, they have ceded most of their territory to the settler state of Quebec and become subject to its legislation and government. The Cree may still have traditional forms of land tenure and governance, yet for this Eleonore employee, they do not constitute jurisdictions or government structures that settler states or corporations must contend with: “We are first and foremost in Quebec, legally speaking.”

Following months of increased tension between the company and the *nituuhuuchimaaau* and their family members living near the mine, the relationship between the two parties became collaborative again. This, according to a Cree Nation of Wemindji’s leader, was the result of his people and the company finally “beginning to understand how to work together” (interview, Wemindji, July 18, 2019; our translation from Cree). In 2019, following Newmont’s purchase of Goldcorp and the departure of the Eleonore administrator quoted above, the current *nituuhuuchimaaau* of the *nituuaschii* where the mine is located was brought on to the Environment Committee. As a result, he is now officially and more directly involved in supervising the mine’s management of its environmental impacts, and his concerns regarding the well-being of the land are, since then, more easily addressed.

In 2015, just a year after production began at Eleonore, Goldcorp approached Wemindji’s leadership to ask them about a possible new development: the construction of a crown pillar, a structure aimed to maximize ore recovery by protecting the underground mine from inflows of water, soil and rocks. Given its potential detrimental environmental impacts, the leadership and the *nituuhuuchimaauch* living near the mine were adamantly opposed to it. According to a Cree community leader interviewed in 2019, Goldcorp’s decision to shelve it further proved their willingness to honourably partner with the Cree in sustaining *Iiyiyiuituwinn*. “We

said that we would not support it and to scrap it. And they scrapped it, . . . and I thought that was very honourable on their part” (interview, Wemindji, July 16, 2019).

Another area where Goldcorp/Newmont eventually showed their true commitment “to ensure the respect, preservation and promotion of the Cree culture” at the mine site is by allocating more regular funding for maintaining and operating the cultural site they committed to construct at the mine in the Opinagow agreement. During the negotiations, the previous *nituuhuuchimaau* living on the territory where Eleonore is located had requested its construction, to both teach non-Cree workers about their culture and help Cree workers “remain strong” while at the mine site. As his wife put it:

When you are inside the tepee, if you are sad or something, the fire can help you. When you look at it, the smell, it relaxes you. And our people enjoy eating our traditional food. “Now I am going to be strong,” they say after eating it (field notes, July 25, 2015).

The term used to express wellness in Eeyou Istchee is *miyupimaatisiun*, “being alive well” (Adelson, 1998). One of the fundamental requirements for *miyupimaatisiun* is *iyiyuumiichim*, the foods procured by Eeyouch from hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering in *nituuaschiih*. Eating *iyiyuumiichim*, the author claims, is not only about physical nourishment. “As *iyiyuumiichim*, bush animals are connected to the Cree people in ways that bridge material and spiritual worlds, and as such have added value and meaning” (Adelson, 1998: 12). While Eeyouch admit eating increasing amounts of “Whiteman’s foods,” Adelson explains that they also worry about the harmful impacts of this diet on their overall well-being. Hence the preoccupation of the *nituuhuuchimaau* with making it possible for Eeyou workers at the mine to consume *iyiyuumiichim* from his *nituuaschi*. As the *nituuhuuchimaau* of the *nituuaschi* where the mine is located, he considered it to be his responsibility to maintain, in this way, these workers’ connections to the land he is charged with caring for.

Reproducing Themselves as Eeyouch

As Blaser (2018: 51) points out, a common assumption within the scholarship on co-management is that the challenge in making different perspectives on a given “natural resource” converge is epistemological in nature: “It is about perspectives on ‘the world’ (singular) and the possible relations they may hold.” We agree with Blaser that the problem should be seen as an ontological one—that is, as “involving the performance of different reals.” It was not just one land that Goldcorp/Newmont perceived and interacted with differently from Wemindji; there were, instead, multiple lands, produced through distinct worlding practices by an array of different actors—including the Quebec that the Eleonore administrator referenced (when his assistant explained that they were collaborating with the Cree community because they were operating in Cree territory) and the *nituuaschi* that the *nituuhuuchimaau* residing near the mine referenced (when worrying about electrocuted animals or expressing disarray about Goldcorp’s new

guidelines). While Indigenous actors are usually aware of the presence of diverging worlds under what appears to be only one thing, settlers, most often, are not. This creates a situation of “asymmetrical equivocation,” which, as defined by Blaser (following Viveiros de Castro [2004]), is one whereby, from the point of view of settlers, interlocutors appear to be speaking of the same reality, when they are actually referring to different ones. This type of equivocation, as we have seen, may be experienced as extremely painful. For the *nituuhuuchimaau* who commented on Goldcorp’s new guidelines, the erasure of the web of reciprocal relations *nituuaschiih* imply was as hurtful as the settler state’s attempt to eliminate him as Eeyou when he was forcibly sent to residential school.

Yet our ethnography also shows that despite such hurtful instances of asymmetrical equivocations, most Wemindji Eeyouch felt that overall the company had meaningfully engaged with sustaining *Iiyiyiuituwini*: it had brought the *nituuhuuchimaau* of the *nituuaschii* where Eleonore is located on to the Environment Committee, it had abandoned its crown pillar project when rejected by the Cree community, and it was finally allocating more regular funding for maintaining and operating a cultural site at Eleonore. Critics of corporate social responsibility programs would be quick to read these actions as ways of containing Eeyou aspirations of self-determination. “Crown sovereignty,” as Stanley reminds us (2016: 2432), “is based on the suspension of Indigenous territoriality and jurisdictional authority.” From this perspective, corporate engagements with Indigenous jurisdictions are never genuine, but calculated. They are mechanisms “through which the threat of Indigenous sovereignty is ‘*risk managed*’” (2433, italics as in the original), with the structural “threat” of Indigenous rights and title commodified and transformed into “investment costs,” such as the cost of dropping a crown pillar project or maintaining a cultural site.

All the Cree community members we spoke to agreed that it would be naive not to think that Goldcorp/Newmont’s motivation to engage them as partners was first and foremost financial in nature. Yet they were quick to point out that they themselves, as business partners, were also invested in the mine’s profitability: “You can’t be blind to the reality. It is a . . . a global corporation. And at a corporate level, they do what you gotta do to make *us* money” (interview, Wemindji, July 16, 2019; emphasis added). Given a lack of economic development alternatives in Canada’s north, mining is often read as a “false choice.” However, while this is certainly true from a political-economic standpoint, it is not generally understood and lived as such by the Eeyouch. Through the development of a Cree mining policy for the “promotion and support of mining activities,” the creation of an Exploration Training Program to assist *nituuhuuchimaau* in becoming prospectors, by seeking a “cohesive partnership” with a mining company or by becoming trained to work or gain employment in the mining industry, the Eeyouch have rather proactively sought to economically profit from mining. To be sure, “communities . . . are divided in their responses to industrialization and in their understandings of its effects on local economies, ecosystems and human health” (Horowitz, 2011: 1387). In our conversations, some community members did not express the same enthusiasm toward mining, out of concern for the mine’s ill socio-cultural or environmental impacts. Yet the Cree community leadership has managed to maintain support for the mine by meeting regularly with community members

who had concerns and by finding ways to address these concerns through the company-community committees that oversee the mine's activities. Eleonore's financial contribution to the socio-economic and cultural well-being of the whole community (and not just a few of its employed members) has been another important factor in cultivating that support.

The potential socio-economic profitability of the mine, however, was not the sole reason Wemindji was motivated to collaborate with its proponent. Partnering with the mining company first and foremost constituted, from Eeyouch perspectives, a way of asserting their jurisdiction over their territory. In his examination of treaty-making in Yukon, Nadasdy (2012: 501) found that this process "necessarily projects onto First Nation societies very particular assumptions about the kinds of political entities they must be" to exercise their jurisdiction and be considered sovereign. In Eeyou Istchee, however, agreements with the settler states or corporations have not profoundly transformed their sociality, political structures or philosophy (Salée and Lévesque, 2010; Feit, 2004). In the more specific case analyzed here, the Cree have rather managed to shape their IBA, from its negotiations through to its implementation, in ways that have allowed them to reproduce *Iiyiyiuituwini*. Despite adversarial beginnings, Wemindji's leadership sought to build a "cohesive partnership" with their corporate interlocutors; they requested collective forms of socio-economic benefits instead of individual ones; and they finally secured the meaningful inclusion of *nituuhuuchimaauch* and *nituuaschiih* in the administrative structures overseeing the mine's activities. Like the Tłchq (MacDonald et al., 2014: 72), the Cree have brought mining corporations into social exchanges with them, so that they "can continue the past practices of stewardship, respect, and protection of animals and land" and thus reproduce themselves as Eeyouch.

Conclusion

In this article, we have shown how, despite a limiting politico-legal context and ontological disagreements with the extractive industry, the Cree Nation of Wemindji has exercised its sovereignty through honourably partnering with a mining company for the construction and operation of a mine in Eeyou Istchee. To be sure, Canada's free mining regime (Laforce et al., 2009), combined with Indigenous peoples' historical impoverishment and socio-political marginalization (TRC, 2015), seriously restrict Indigenous Nations' capacity to have a say in how their territories are used. Faced with a hegemonic complex able to counter and resist oppositional forces to extractive development (Pineault, 2018), many Indigenous Nations employ direct action (Pasternak, 2017) or reluctantly enter IBA negotiations (Blaser, 2018) to exercise their sovereignty in a power field that critically constrains their repertoire of action. For the Cree Nation of Wemindji, however, engaging in discussions with Goldcorp was neither experienced nor understood as a compromised way of asserting Eeyouch jurisdiction in Eeyou Istchee. From a world that is primarily relational and fundamentally grounded in an ethic of reciprocity, these negotiations were rather lived as sustaining and affirming that very jurisdiction.

It is important to acknowledge that several factors have enabled this First Nation to develop a collaborative relationship with a mining company. In comparison with

most other Indigenous Nations in Canada, the Cree of Eeyou Istchee enjoy significant economic and institutional resources as well as political clout. While the JBNQA only provides them with limited legal foundation to oppose unwanted projects, this First Nation has generally succeeded in either interrupting their construction through settler state interventions (such as Quebec's moratorium on uranium mining; see Papillon and Rodon, 2019) or compelling these projects' promoters to meaningfully engage with them as partners.

In this article, we have acknowledged and outlined the many challenges this second approach entails (see also Whiteman, 2004). Extractive development corporations, like settler states or societies in general, are not easily amenable to recognizing and respecting Indigenous values and land use rights that are different from their own. From the perspective of the *nituuaschiih* and their family members living around the mine, Goldcorp/Newmont's commitments in that regard have not always been honoured. These Eeyouch nonetheless acknowledge that their nation's relationship with the mining company is a work in progress. Most of the literature on the topic has stressed the limitations of such relations. In this article, we have instead focused on its potential to highlight Indigenous peoples' efforts at sustaining socialities that fundamentally disrupt settler colonial attempts to command and control the terms of our interactions with humans and more-than-humans. Indigenous sovereignty, we argue following Powell (2018), is not only situated in the legal-judicial sphere of land claims. It is also enacted through everyday relationships within sentient territories. Hence it is important to change scales and attend to these relationships, so as to be able to grasp how partnering with a mining company can be understood and practised as exercising self-determination from Indigenous perspectives.

Supplementary Material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423922000178>.

Acknowledgments. We would like to offer our most sincere gratitude to Julia Gilpin, who assisted us in Wemindji. We also sincerely thank all the Cree research participants, and most especially Rodney Mark, Sammy Blackned and Katherine Moses, for their generous teachings. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Universidad Central de Chile in Santiago, Queen's University in Kingston, and the University of Ottawa. A special thanks to Margaret Moore, Kerstin Reibold, Colin Scott, Sophie Thériault, and our anonymous reviewers for incisive feedback as we were finalizing this article. We finally acknowledge the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (430-2014-00635), the Centre for Indigenous Conservation and Development Alternatives (FRQ-SC RG 203846), Indigenous Stewardship of Environment and Alternative Development (FRQ-SC SE 204551), and the Centro de Estudios Interculturales e Indígenas (CONICYT/FONDAP/15110006).

Notes

1 The terms *Cree*, *Eeyou* (singular) and *Eeyouch* (plural) will be used in this article to identify the Cree of Eeyou Itchee.

2 Newmont purchased Goldcorp in January 2019.

3 Anishnaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor (2008) has revived the term *survivance* to point to the "active presence" and continuance of Indigenous ways of life and knowing. Indigenous peoples, he affirms, have not only survived; they are continuing to live as Indigenous peoples.

4 See the online appendix for details.

5 <http://www.cmeb.org/index.php/training-initiatives/training-job-assistance> (October 28, 2020).

6 <http://www.cmeb.org/index.php/about-us/history> (October 28, 2020).

7 http://q4dev.s11.clientfiles.s3-website-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/653477107/files/doc_downloads/portfolio_docs/eleonore/goldcorp-opinagow-en-web.pdf (January 7, 2021).

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Cite this article: Vanthuyne, Karine and Mathieu Gauthier. 2022. "Mining the Land While Sustaining *Iiyiyiuituwini*: Exercising Indigenous Sovereignty through Collaboration in Eeyou Istchee." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 55 (2): 279–299. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423922000178>